DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 285 051 CE 048 289

AUTHOR Boon, J.; van Enckevort, G.
TITLE Studying at the Open University of the Netherlands, Developments 1984-1987.
PUB DATE 8 Jun 87
NOTE 17p.; For a related document, see CE 048 288.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; Adult Education; *Adult Programs; *Distance Education; Dropout Rate; Employment Level; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Nontraditional Education; *Open Universities; Outcomes of Education; *Program Effectiveness; *Student Characteristics; Student Educational Objectives
IDENTIFIERS *Open University (Netherlands)

ABSTRACT

A study examined the success of the first three years of the Dutch Open University's operation by analyzing data pertaining to students' backgrounds and academic progress while enrolled in the open university. The fact that registered inquiries about the Dutch Open University rose from 120,000 during the summer and autumn of 1984 to more than 200,000 toward the end of 1986 indicates that the Dutch Open University's market appeal appears to be increasing. The Dutch Open University has also been successful in continuing to attract new students; it had 30,302 formal enrollees as of January 1987. The greatest percentage of these enrollees are over the age of 31. The expectation that the Dutch Open University would attract increasing numbers of females and would have a student body that was at least half female has not materialized; the percentage of female enrollees has remained between 30 and 35 percent (with only one semester in which it reached 38 percent). More than 53 percent of the 1987 enrollees already had a higher education diploma before enrolling in the Dutch Open University. Although the Open University's stated goal of providing adult learners with a "second chance" appeared to be on target when it first opened, enrollees are, with increasing frequency, using it as a way of updating or continuing education. Although self-fulfillment remains the dominant motive of new enrollees, the importance of labor market-related motives is increasing. To date, the average course completion rate is within 1.5 years for the first students, and for the first 17 courses it is 32.7 percent. (MN)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

J. Boon and G. van Enckevort

ED285051

STUDYING AT THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF THE NETHERLANDS, DEVELOPMENTS 1984-1987

Introduction

When the 'Open Universiteit', the Open university of the Netherlands (OU-NL), started in September 1984 the number of students indicated an unexpected success (see Van Enckevort, 1985). The success was unexpected in the Netherlands itself: only half a year earlier a cautious calculation of 13.000 students for the first year was rejected by officials of the department of education and science as too optimstic, and the planning committee, four years earlier, did not dare to count on more than 3000 students for the first year. But during the first months of operation (September 1984 - April 1985) already about 23.000 persons made an application for enrolment. Also colleagues from other distance teaching universities in Western Europe and in Canada considered this number as far more than could have been expected for a starting, new Open university.

One of the questions that has been brought forward in that period, was whether this number was merely a result of a stowage reservoir and could be continued in the future: the enrolment system accepted almost every applicant as a student, and this should bring about a high rate of drop-out. Another question was whether the number and the characteristics of the students and their future study progress would be influenced by the specific features of the Ou-NL: not only distance study (freedom of place and time), but also open entry (no formal qualifications required), freedom of pace and freedom of programming their own curriculum for the students. (See for a short description of origins and features of the Ou-NL: Morin, 1986.)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

G van Enckevort

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Now, two and a half years later it is possible to provide an provisional analysis of the students' characteristics and of some developments and trends. This analysis is based on the students' statistics that appear each half year (1st of May and 1st of November) with data from the general computerized students' file (enrolment figures and figures about participation in examinations etc.) and on some additional research. Of course this contains only a part of the data that are necessary to judge the results and the quality of the Ou-NL. (For a fuller account see Van Enckevort and Leibbrandt, 1987.)

Quantitative developments: demands en enrolments

A year before the Ou started, already more than 50% of a representative sample of the Dutch population of 18 years and older said to have heard about the new institute. Subsequent investigations revealed that knowledge about the Ou among the adult population has risen to 70-80% and that most of these people have a reasonably adequate image of the Ou (its features of openness but also its character of higher education). Although a lot of students underestimate the real degree of difficulty of distance higher education, there is a general awareness that it is difficult: it requires not a formal qualification but nevertheless a high level of previous knowledge and of self-discipline is needed for successfull study.

The registered number of people who asked for information (enquirers) about the Ou with a view to possible study, at the central office, rose from the explosive start of 120.000 during summer and autumn 1984 to more than 200.000 towards the end of 1986. To this should be added an unknown number of people who asked for and received information in one of the 18 study centres, were publicity, study advice and counselling started at the end of 1984. A remarkable trend is the broadening of a market orientation among potential students: in the beginning it was for most of the enquirers a choice between the Ou and no study at all (and 1 out of 4 to 5 people who asked for information applied as a student), and now there is more a weighing of several alternative possibilities

for study (with the result that the number that choose for the Ou is decreasing towards 1 out of 8 or 10). Of course this trend is influencing the policy with regard to the amount of material that can be provided free of charge.

The Ou succeeded in keeping the interest of the population, but also in continuously attracting new students throughout the year. It did this despite the high influx during the first months from the stowage reservoire and also despite a negative publicity as a result of the arrears in course production that became apparent in the beginning of 1985. When the materials of a desired course are available, an applicant is enrolled almost immediately. Developments of applications and enrolments (students starting their first course) are given in table 1.

Table 1: Applications and enrolments (starting) per period

	Applications	Enrolment (n=persons)
until nov. '84	19.178	7.474
1-11-'85 - 1-05-'85	3.798	6.067
1-05-'85 - 1-11-'85	2.807	4.599
1-11-'85 - 1-05-'86	2.733	7.795
1-05-'86 - 1-11-'86	3.749	4.437
1-11-'86 - 1-05-'87	4.036	3.984
waiting	--	1.945
	36.301	36.301

On 1-5-'87 the number of formally registered students was 30.302, of whom

- 17.239 were enrolled for one course
- 9.536 were enrolled for two or three courses, and
- 3.527 were enrolled for four or more courses.

At that date 4.045 students had been removed from the register either because they passed a course examination without re-registering for a second course (715), because they asked to be removed prematurely(1085), or because they had exceeded their two-year-period of registration without participating in an examination (2281). 'Formally registered' however does not mean that all these students are actively studying their course: see beneath.

It is now expected, for the anual budget, that in this year (1987) and the next year (1988), when more than 40 courses will be available, about 10.000 new students each year can be enrolled. It was expected also (and accepted by the government) that 50% of the students would behave as degree-students (wishing to obtain a diploma), with a dropout rate of 30% in the first year, 45% (cumulative) in the second year, 50% in the third year, 55% in the fourth year, and so on. The other half of the influx of new students should, in these expectations, be considered as course-students or continuing-education-students, of whom 60% would take also a course in the second year and 30% in the third year. The most recent figures show that during 1987 there will probably be more than 10.000 new students. However the percentage of students taking a second, a third etc. course is lower and slower than was expected.

Students' characteristics

Seen from one of the policy goals of the Ou ('a second chance') it is important to know whether it develops as an institute for higher education of adults (mature students) or as an alternative of higher education for youngsters and whether the proportion of the female students is higher than at conventional universities. Table 2 gives the distribution of students enrolled at 1-5-'87 according to age and sexe.

Table 2: Students according to age and sexe

	male		female		total	
	(n)	(col.pct.)	(n)	(col.pct.)	(n)	(col.pct.)
under 26 yrs.	1421	7,0	1051	10,5	2472	8.1
26 - 30 yrs.	4808	23,7	2536	25,4	7344	24,2
31 - 35 yrs.	4999	24,6	2285	22,9	7284	24,0
36 - 40 yrs.	4062	20,0	1784	17,9	5846	19,3
41 - 45 yrs.	2261	11,1	1046	10,5	3307	10,9
46 - 50 yrs.	1049	5,2	511	5,1	1560	5,1
51 - 55 yrs.	580	2,9	388	3,4	918	3,0
over 55 yrs.	1130	5,6	441	4,5	1571	5,1
Total	20310		9992		30302	
	(67%)		(33%)			

As for age it can be concluded that the Ou-NL has relatively a great number of mature students (over 30 yrs.), in general relatively more also than comparable institutes, except the British Open University.

Table 3: Students according to age, distance teaching universities, in percentages

	Ou-NL (1987)	Ou-UK (1984)	UNED Spain (1984)	FernUniv., W.Germany (1984)	Athabasca Un. (1983)
under 25	8,1 (under 26)	4,6	22	16	23
under 30	32,3 (under 31)	22,5	51	61 (under 31)	--
over 40	24,1 (over 40)	32,2	12	15	10 (over 45)

The British Ou appears to have the oldest student population. The difference in admission policy until '85 (minimum age 21 in stead of 18 as in the Netherlands) cannot explain this, and the fact that in the Ou-NL also course-students are included could have done expected a higher average age. Probably the explanation has to be found in the more general social and cultural context of the countries, or in the programs and courses that are offered. During the two-and-a-half-years of operation untill now, the percentage of older students at the Ou-NL has apparently decreased: the proportion of students older than 50 years has gone down from 10,3% in the first months to about 5% during the last year. Probably this can be explained by the stowage-reservoir: relatively more older people were 'waiting' for the Ou to start, and they had no alternatives. The increase occured not in the lowest age-groups (under 21 or 21-25 yrs.), but mainly in the groups between 25 en 36 years (from 44 % to 51%).

As for sexe the expectations (or the hope) of some people that the Ou-NL would attract at least 50% female student or that the percentage would increase during time have not been fullfilled. In the six periods of six months until now the influx of female

students was between 30 and 35%, with only one exception (38% in the second period). However, this percentage is higher than the influx of younger women at the conventional universities out of the same birth-groups: in 1970 there were only 22% female first-year students and in 1975 30%. And women at the Ou take relatively more frequently a course in physical sciences, technical science, economics or business and administration studies: 17% of female degree students in the OU, compared with 5% in parttime studies at other Dutch universities. Also at the Ou women show a traditional 'female' study choice, but not as strong as their younger sisters. Within de Ou women compared with men are overrepresented in the youngest age categories (under 30 years) and have more frequently a study plan for one or more courses instead of a full degree program. (See also Boon and Joosten, 1987). Compared with the British Ou (45% women) and Athabasca University (62%) the participation of women at the Ou-NL is considerably lower; it is almost the same as in the UNED-Spain (38%) and considerably higher than the in German Fern-Universität (24%). This can be partially explained by the contents of the courses that are offered until now by these institutes.

Besides age and sexe previous education is an important factor in the light of goals of openness.

Table 4: Students according to highest previous education

	male (n)	(col.pct.)	female (n)	(col.pct.)	total (n)	(col.pct.)
basic school (6/7 yrs.)*	77	(0,4)	28	(0,3)	105	(0,4)
basic vocational school (6+3/4)*	390	(2,0)	105	(1,1)	495	(1,7)
general secundary education, lower level (6+3/4)*	2055	(10,6)	1292	(13,7)	3347	(11,6)
medium vocational school (6+4/5)*	3216	(16,7)	1105	(11,7)	4321	(15,0)
general secundary education, upper level (6+5/6)*	4784	(24,8)	3241	(34,3)	8028	(27,9)
higher vocational training (6+4+5)*	6904	(35,8)	3077	(32,5)	9981	(34,7)
university education (6+6+4/6)*	1877	(9,7)	614	(6,5)	2491	(8,7)
	19306		9462		28768	

(unknown: 1534)

* figures give years of duration of education in the formal school system

In the Dutch educational system people with upper level-general secundary education have access to higher education, and only a part of them to universities. So it can be concluded that more than 40% of the students have a possibility for higher education at university-level at the Ou, which they otherwise would not have had, and there is a large proportion of people who want to enlarge their higher vocational training towards university education at a later age. On the other hand the proportion of students who have already a higher education diploma is also very high: 43,4%. This proportion has increased from 37% among new students in september/october 1984 to 53% during the last six months. In other words: in the first period the 'second chance-character' was more dominant, and now Ou-courses are more and more used for updating or continuing education by people with high previous education.

This could be a typical feature of the Ou-NL because of its openness in programming: courses are multifunctional (not only part of degree programmes).

The employment status of students gives an indication of the 'second-route' character: the possibility to combine study and work.

Table 5: Employment status and period of first start (%)

period	paid job	unem-ployed	house-wives/men	retired	labour dis-ability	student	other
till nov. '84	68,8	13,0	9,2	3,2	2,8	1,4	1,5
nov'84-apr'85	69,4	13,5	10,6	2,4	1,9	1,1	1,1
may'85-oct'85	72,9	10,9	8,8	2,8	2,4	1,0	1,2
nov'85-apr'86	77,6	9,9	7,0	1,4	1,3	1,4	1,3
apr'86-oct'86	76,8	10,7	6,2	1,3	1,7	1,7	1,6
nov'86-apr'87	75,1	12,5	6,4	1,5	1,5	1,2	1,9

Of all the students enrolled at 1-5-'87 about 73% had a paid job; of the female students 51% had a paid job. These percentages are increasing apparently, only partly influenced by the decrease of older students (retired).
The proportion of students without a paid job is obviously higher than at the British Ou (20%) and at the German Fern-Universität (11%).

Motives to study (at the Ou)

In the enrolment form starting students are also asked to give information about their motives or general aims to study and about their reasons for choosing the Ou.

For the motives to study they can mark 3 possibilities at a maximum out of 7 alternatives.

Table 6: Study motives (%)

	All students	Male	Female	First period (till nov'84)	Last period (nov'86-april'87)
1) improvement of present job	22,6	28,1	11,4	18,9	24,5
2) better chance for (another) job	47,7	50,3	42,2	43,8	50,7
3) good leisure-time activity	35,6	32,6	41,7	40,8	31,6
4) development of personal capacities	63,6	59,7	71,5	64,9	60,5
5) better fulfillment of social duties	17,9	19,7	14,4	18,3	16,4
6) improvement of knowledge/contents of the course	25,5	23,1	30,4	24,0	27,1
7) keeping up with scientific developments	23,6	25,3	20,2	23,2	22,3
8) other	6,2	6,5	5,8	7,4	6,0

The self-fulfillment motive (4, and also 3) seems to be most dominant, especially among women. But the importance of labour market motives (1 and 2) is growing: probably due to the decrease of age, but also to the availability of courses (in the first period mainly law and liberal arts, now also more in other faculties). However, it has to be stressed also that these motives are attitude measurements and that the objective position in the labour market may be more important (research in progress by Boon and Joosten).

An equally interesting development is shown in the reasons given by students for their choice for the Ou. Here they give their most important reason (only one) out of five alternatives.

Table 7: Reasons for choosing the Ou (%)

	All students	Male	Female	First period	Last period
1) No qualifications required	10,4	10,9	9,4	16,0	6,6
2) Cannot folluw education elsewhere	34,9	34,5	35,8	33,3	32,5
3) Freedom of place, time en pacing	41,6	40,9	42,8	39,2	43,5
4) Contents of the course	4,5	4,4	4,8	4,7	5,3
5) Freedom of programming	5,3	6,1	3,8	4,0	6,5
6) Other	3,3	3,2	3,4	2,8	5,6

The reason of 'open access' has decreased in favour of the reasons 'freedom of place, time and pace' (the feature of distance teaching!) and 'freedom of programming'. This is obviously a relationship with a higher influx of student with high previous education. In comparison with the British Ou the growing importance of 'freedom of programming' is worth to be noticed and it would be interesting for future research to analyse the specific influence of the freedom of pacing.

Study behaviour and study progress

The specific features of the Ou-NL together with its admission policy (every applicant almost immediately is registered as a student) were and are reasons for the fear that there could be a lot of students but that these students would not progress very far: the rate of drop-out in distance education is already high and the risk exists that this would be even higher at the Ou-NL.

Dropout, profit and progress are conceptions that refer not only to goals of the institute but also to goals of the student themselves. The students of the Ou-NL make up a very heterogeneous group: in their backgrounds and motives, and in

their intentions. People who are enrolled at the Ou, are stimulated not to make a definite choice for a series of courses leading to a university degree, but to use the flexibility that is offered by multifunctional courses to decide at a later time: a decision that can be more adequate after making acquaintance with at least one course. At first enrolment they can express (provisional) intentions, but not definite study plans. Students who started before 1-11-'84 have for 62,4% an intention to obtain a degree in one of the 7 fields of study (comparable to faculties); among the students who started between 1-11-'84 and 1-5-'87 this percentage is only 39,3%. The percentage of students who gave as intention to follow one course or only a few courses increased from 7,7 to 14,8%; who said that they did not know yet, from 15,1% to 25,1%; and who gave no information about their intentions, from 7,4% to 21,0%.

About half of the Ou-students who started two years or longer ago, have taken at least a second course and about one in five took 4 or more courses. (A course stands for 100 or 200 hours of study on average.)

Does this indicate a high rate of drop-out?

A first comparison could be made with Athabasca University in Canada (see: An analysis of AU-students, 1986). In AU within one year about two-thirds of the students register for only one course and only 5% take three or more courses. Although a 'repurchase' seems to be desirable for the institute in commercial terms, one could also state that the results show that separate courses as such have proven their value, provided that the students are satisfied with the course (as is generally the case in AU as well as in the Ou-NL). The institute has to take account of 'a rapid rate of market flow-through', as is stated by the AU-researchers. (And that certainly is quite another evaluation than the attitude of some people at the British OU in the '70-s that 'the open door' seemed to act as 'a revolving door'!)

Another comparison that should be made is that with the British Ou, also for the reason that in the political debate in the Netherlands around 1980 their rate of success was used as a reference: about 50% of the students gaining a degree. This comparison is more difficult, not only because of differences in the social and cultural context, but also because of big differences in the enrolment system. Only a small part of the students in the Ou-NL are comparable to the degree students in the Ou-UK. Or, in other words, only a part of the 'clients' are 'students'.

- The Ou-UK-students to be referred to, are degree students and also the applicants for a study at the Ou-UK have the original intention to obtain a university degree. This would mean that only about 60-70% of the Ou-NL students could be conceived as potential degree-students (applicants) in the British system.
- In the Dutch system every applicant is registered as a 'student', after he or she has paid the course fee. In the Ou-UK a fluctuating part of the applicants who after a period of several months get the offer to become a student, does not accept that offer. E.g. in 1982/3 to get 24.500 students 39.000 persons out of 43.300 applicants were offered a place. In other words: a first 'drop-out' of 38%? In 1984/5 this number was about 25%.
- Accepting a place in the Ou-UK means 'provisional registration', and from the provisionally registered students a varying number of 24% to 29% (except for the first year) are not finally registered. This 'final registration' could be compared with a registration for a second course in the Ou-NL of students who had an intention to obtain a degree.
- In fact, about 30% of the Ou-NL-students who started in the first period took a second course and expressed the intention to obtain a university degree. Of the Ou-UK-students between 57% and 44% of 'applicants' become finally registered

'degree-students', and about 80% of them re-registered in the second year (45 to 35% of the initial applicants!) to whom a place is offered.

Some other figures are:

- In the introductory and orientation courses about 25 to 30% of the students seem not to start at all: they are just interested in the materials ('clients') or decide in an early stage that it is not feasible for them to study for an examination.
- About 50 to 55% of the students who started two years or longer ago participated in the course examination.
- The pass rate for examinations varies for the participants between 15 and 90%, with an average of 57,5%.
- Of all the students who participate in an examination, 71,5% pass after one, two or three occasions. On average they pass after 1,24 occasions.

The average course completion rate (without a correction for the so called 'non-starters', see Shale, 1982) within 1,5 years for the first students and for the first 17 courses was 32,7%. This can be compared with the CCR in Athabasca University of 29%, using the same definition. The variation is mainly between 15 and 48%.

The future

Altogether the experiences until now give us the impression that the Ou-NL because of its specific features attracts a lot of students who can be labeled as 'risk groups' in terms of re-purchase of courses and of gaining credits (and degrees in the future), but the limited chance these groups get at the Ou has to be compared with (almost) no chance at all in other institutes of higher education in the Netherlands and cannot be compared with other distance teaching universities without further analyses. A risk raising feature of the Ou-NL certainly is the freedom of pace that will give more weight to the capacity of self-regulation on the side of the students (see Vermunt, 1987) but on the other hand allows certain groups to participate in higher education, and the same result comes from the freedom to plan his own curriculum out of a combination of courses.

A review of policy in 1986/87 aims at the changes in the differentiation at or shortly after the moment of enrolment between certain categories of students (clients, course students and degree students) and at changes in the system and methods of counselling and tutoring without abandoning the original features of openness.

The most difficult task remaines to offer course materials and support services to such a heterogeneous group of students and clients, not only heterogeneous in demographic, social and educational backgrounds, but also in their intentions. And this will be even more difficult when the Ou-NL has to attract for financial reasons newer groups such as students in other institutions of higher education ('credit transfer' vice versa) and people from training departments in business and industry. Will an educational offer that is meant to be appropriate for almost everybody, remain to be appropriate for specific target groups?

References

(Studentstatistics, vol. 1-10, and Statistical information, occasional memoranda, 1986/'87, by researchers of the Bureau for Research and Evaluation, Open universiteit: J. Boon, G. Joosten en W. van der Galiën-Roodhardt.)

An analysis of AU-students, Motivations, intentions and behaviour. Athabasca: Centre for Distance Education, Athabasca University, 1986.

J. Bartels and O. Peters, The German Distance University: its main features and functions. In: G. van Enckevort o.a. (eds.), 1986, p. 97-110.

J. Boon and G. Joosten, Reconsideration of the attraction of the Dutch Open university for female students. In: K. Faith (ed.), Women in Distance Education. London: Croom Helm, 1987.

G. van Enckevort, The Dutch Open university opened: an unexpected success. ICDE-bulletin, vol. 7, 1985, p. 28-34.

G. van Enckevort, K. Harry, P. Morin and H.G. Schutze (eds.), Distance higher education and the adult learner. Heerlen/Maastricht: Open universiteit/Van Gorcum, 1986.

G. van Enckevort and G.J. Leibbrandt, The Open university of the Netherlands: 'serving the adult learner' by distance education and 'innovating higher education'. Paper for an OECD-conference, Stockholm, 1987. Heerlen: Open universiteit, 1987.

J. Field, Student learning from media. Institutional Research Review, vol. 1, 1982, p. 101-136.

Into the 1990's. The role of the Open university in the national provision of part-time higher education. Milton Keynes: Open university, 1986.

P. Morin, The Open university of the Netherlands: backgrounds and objectives. In: G. van Enckevort a.o. (eds.), 1986, p. 71-75.

G. Rumble, The Open University of the United Kingdom. An evaluation of innovative experience in the democratisation of higher education. Milton Keynes: The Open University, Distance education research group, 1982.

H.G. Schutze, Adults in higher education. Stockholm: Almquist and Wicksell, 1987.

D. Shale, A study of course completion rates. Athabasca: Athabasca University, Institutional Studies Report, 1982.

J. Vermunt, Learning styles and self-regulation. Paper presented at the AERA-conference, Washington 1987. Tilburg: Catholic University of Brabant, 1987.